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THE WORLD AND THE ARTIST

BY

JOHN DRINKWATER

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WHATEVER the growth of a mechanical civilization may have given us, it presents a profound and increasing difficulty in the realization of a condition that is of great, perhaps of the greatest, importance in the full and wholesome shaping of man's life. The breaking down of all barriers of space has opened up imposing vistas of imperial activity, of which the benefits are well known to Ministers of State; it has also, we learn, shown us the way to a brotherhood of man, on the principle, it may be supposed, that the domestic virtue of brotherly affection is best fostered by not staying at home. Of these rhetorical blessings I do not feel that I am qualified to speak; I see them in misty prospect, and am unmoved. From the manner and character of their prophets they are, at least, suspect in my mind. But as to one result of this mérely mechanical extending of an horizon I am clear, and clear that it is spiritually injurious to man. The growing tendency of

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a world where means of instantaneous communication and rapid transit and the ever-widening ramifications of commercial interests more and more make everybody's business everybody's business, is to breed a shallow and aimless cosmopolitanism in all of us at the expense of an exact and intimate growth in our knowledge of ourselves and our neighbours and the land of our birth. It has become a fashionable thing to exalt a slip-shod acquaintance with a continent above the tender and devoted familiarity with a hamlet, and the counting-house clerk who trades with China and Brazil is no end of a fellow beside the little storekeeper in a country town. For myself, I would rather know the spirit and the habit and the expression of two square miles of a Cotswold hill than have the learning of all the Special Correspondents on the globe, and I will explain why. For the moment, to argue from example, let it be said that the answer to the question

> What does he know of England who only England knows?

is that it may be what Herrick knew, and Keats —while he was a poet—and Blake and Spenser and probably Shakespeare, before which reckoning even the most imperial of poets might be abashed.

In asking what the obscure purpose of life really is, what consummation the spirit of man

on earth can most worthily come to, we shall find some guidance in considering what are the manifestations of that life which, presented to us in clearly intelligible form, most interest us. The relative methods and appeal of history and of creative art are significant. The historian who deals in generalizations and figure-heads and questions of office and procedure and charters merely must look for none but a cold and indifferent audience. The more he wishes to absorb the attention of his readers and secure from them a quick human responsiveness, the more must he approximate his design to that of the artist. He may survey the races and the countries of the world in vain so long as he fails to come closely into contact with the working of the individual mind. And what is the design of the artist whose aim is to present for us the lives of men, and what are the conditions that he finds essential for the successful submission of those lives to his readers' emotions? Consider, for instance, any of Thomas Hardy's novels. Here is a writer of acknowledged eminence, already secure, it may appear, among the great names of European letters. What is the material of his art, in the handling of which he has so deservedly come to this distinction? Is, let us see, the traffic that he finds suitable for his purpose a complicated affair of stocks and bookings and futures, elaborated into an insensitive and bloodless system of paper entries, meaning literally nothing to the people who

conduct it but so many scratches of a pen and so many variations in a bank balance? No; it is rather Henchard's corn-dealing among the Casterbridge farmers, Jude's varying fortunes in stonemasonry, or the affairs of Giles Winterbourne on his rounds with his cider-press. It is a traffic of intimate detail, where the whole of a transaction is closely in touch with real things and not sterilized in a ledger-world of generalities. And the whole of the life that is so interesting in these novels is of this simple but concrete nature. An artist has won world-fame in the realm of intellect and imagination by creating in his art not people of world-wide power or eminence, not people greatly abreast of the imperial idea and mechanical progress, but folk moving narrowly in the orbit of simple and uncelebrated lives; narrowly, but with tremendous vibration and vivid realization always of the facts of their daily existence. They do but make a more or less frugal living on the land, or in the village schoolhouse, or at a craft, or in the woodland, love, beget and bear children, quarrel and are generous, and fall before the common accidents of nature or survive them into an easy or forlorn old age. And yet how absorbing are their stories for us, how eternally significant; and it is because of this very quality of direct contact with the things and events of earth and the intimacy of human relationships that they are so, and that is because in our deepest nature we

know that this contact and this intimacy are in truth the noblest functions of the spirit, and that beside them all transcendental and imperial and ocean-going generalizations are but empty pretentiousness. Among these real beings of Thomas Hardy's world, when we come across one putting on something of the cosmopolitan, like Fitzpiers, how flashy and shallow and unstable he seems; how lamentably less does he realize life and, so to speak, become life, than his ignorant and unconsidered rival, Giles. And you will find this always in great art when the lives of men are the artist's material—the principle governing his whole purpose will be that of making such lives concrete, vividly in contact with their landscape or circumstance, intensely realizing their own activity, of making them, in short, within their own convention, complete. Even when our interest is claimed by the artist not so much for the actual lives of men as for some great moral or imaginative idea, as in the Greek tragedies, the poet nevertheless finds it convenient to present his idea through *dramatis personæ* who are by no means lacking in detailed and exact definition. But when our interest is directed towards such actual lives, then the conditions of which I speak will be found always to prevail entirely. Shakespeare never fails to comply with this necessity of his art in the most absorbing manner. The particularity of invention with which his people appear before us is notable

always, but it is, as we should expect, on the whole of greater emphasis in the comedies, where he seeks to delight us in the mere contemplation of resilient and pungent lives, than in the tragedies with their controlling tissue of idea. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, we find a group of people revolving in a sharply outlined world of their own, into which hardly a whisper strays from beyond, and we are shown their movement in that world with an unflagging play of invention, quickening their every turn, explicit in every circumstance. The courts of Orsino and Olivia might, so self-contained they are, be walled in together from all external sight or tidings, and yet the intensity of life in them gains every way from the limitation. The life that these artists show to us is a life always worthy for its own sake and for the immediate moment, while the life fostered by a mechanical civilization is one that is either engaged in some abnormal excitement that is but an escape from desperate monotony, being of no emotional significance whatever, or it is in an indefinite reference to some vague event that is always round the corner, as it were, and never realized.

It is sometimes said that mechanical progress is as fruitful a ground for poetry as any activity that has preceded it. We are told, with the flourish of those who would sometimes condescend to the arts from their more practical affairs, that there is a splendour about the express train, the

dynamo, the million-rivets-a-day punching machine, that is as worthy of celebration as the beauty of the vineyard, the plough, or the sheep-track, and we are shown a *McAndrew's Hymn* or a *Song of Speed* or a recitative from the latest Vortex in witness. But the truth is that, while it is unwise to exclude any volume of subject matter as unfit for the poet's use, at least potentially, this particular volume of mechanical activity has never inspired any profoundly moving poetry, and is quite unlikely to do so, and for the reason that it is essentially in conflict with the poetic impulse. The so-called romance of this mechanical civilization is but the plausible invention of a social conscience that knows at heart that an offence is being done against the deeper things of the spirit. If we consider what is perhaps the most marvellous product of the imperially-minded mechanic, the aeroplane, we find in it a thing of considerable spectacular beauty—though it may be we shall consider it to be no greater than that of a motor-car with growing familiarity—and imposing efficiency. In the normal life of the world it might on the one hand afford us such pleasure as we now get from, say, a holiday voyage on a liner, which, delightful as it is, cannot claim to have any profound or permanent bearing on our emotional life, or it might bring a new facility to the transit and mail services without adding one pulse-beat to the general sum of human happiness. But whatever

its credentials may be, can it ever assume a significance approaching that of the plough, for example, in which is symbolised for ever a fundamental condition of man's life? Does not the kind of activity for which it stands, indeed, definitely distract the mind of man from intimate realization of the elemental mood for which the plough stands, to an altogether shallower preoccupation? All this mechanical turn in the history of mankind is against the poetic spirit because it tends to heighten speed, to extend superficial range, and to lessen intensity. The whole purpose of the artists, as I have attempted very briefly to illustrate by examples from Shakespeare and Thomas Hardy, is to achieve the greatest possible intensity without regard to any other considerations whatever. To them it seems a matter of searching importance that a man should have learnt how to set the roots of a tree in the earth, or that an amiable gull should have a preference for a flame-coloured stock, while they would hold it to be a thing of no consequence that you should get your letters from America in a fortnight instead of six months, or in twelve hours instead of a fortnight. It may be worth remarking by the way how much mechanical ease has destroyed of the mystery of simple adventure, of a day when men explored not a new invention merely, but wonderlands that were as their own familiar places, using what of invention they could, not for its own sake, but

for this large end. What was once an epic notion has become a fantastical humour, a mere indulgence in aimless sensation. To cross Europe in a morning, even to cross it in a whirlwind, is in kind the same experience as rocketting along an exhibition switchback. At best this instinct for physical adventure comes not, perhaps, from the profounder concerns of the spirit, but at its best it has, nevertheless, a worthy nobility. But what do the marvellous acrobats of modern mechanical science know of the real inspiration of the voyagers who stood silent upon a peak in Darien?

It may be complained that all this is reactionary, that to heed such prompting would be to retard progress. We hear much about the modern spirit, and the necessity of accepting it, of making art its collaborator, not its antagonist. We must, we are told, be of our own time, or perish. This is admirable doctrine, for those who understand it; for those who do not, and use it as so many do as a convenient justification of any iniquity and, incidentally, as a quiet admonishment to the artist to mind his peace, it is damnation. We must consider this question closely, for it is one about which much dangerous nonsense is spoken in these days. As for the hint to the artist not to interfere with currents directed from more important energies than his, we may set that aside with an easily afforded tolerance. But when we are asked to abase ourselves before this modernism, we owe it to ourselves and to life to

inquire narrowly what precisely is the nature of the idol for whom our service is demanded, and we must be as courageous if needs be before any loose charge of reactionaryism as we should be before that of rebellion. We will seek loyally to foster what seems good in modernism, but we will be fearless to denounce and refuse its ignoble elements, of which there are not a few.

In the first place we may dismiss the mere aspect of time. Clearly, if we mean by modern no more than of the moment, we should do very foolishly to exalt any such estate for worship. What would then be modern to-day might be fit only for the museum a generation hence, when the vitality of a long-gone age would still be fresh. There was once, but a few years ago, a portent in England; people spoke breathlessly to each other of the almost monstrous wonder of a new age, of a miraculous distancing of the mind's earlier conceptions, and these awestruck gossips, if they ever thought at all of, shall we say, the achievements of the Elizabethan theatre, doubtless did so as of a dusty antiquity, matter for idler moments or for the dilettante. And to-day, which remains the greater triumph of man's invention, Stephenson's charming and by no means insignificant little locomotive, or *King Lear* and *The Alchemist*? But the tendency to value too highly the ingenuity that works divorced from the profounder realities of life is by no means the gravest mistake of the indis-

criminating apostle of modernism. The first thing that we have to consider in the ordering of our lives is that to each one of us is given a definite and limited fund of energy to expend, and our most serious responsibility is to see that none of this is wasted or misapplied. I know of no better summary of the derelict instinct of these later generations, of which we must dare to hope that we are the last, than Mr. Gordon Bottomley's cry against the energy that addresses itself always to the devising of " machines for making more machines." It is a vicious extravagance that permeates our society. Men employ their most precious cunning to make three engines in a week, for no positive excellence in the feat and with no other thought than that beyond that they may be able to make six; they learn a new language in a month, then in a week, then they will telescope all languages into one, and hope, no doubt, for the happy day when speech will be quickened into a telegraphic code; which event will prove to be but a stage towards some yet more fortunate dispensation; they bombard cities at a range of twenty miles, of seventy, cherishing yet, it may be, designs on the moon, and they make money with a single zeal for making more money. And it is all, we are told, vigour and intensity of life. Every age has its delusions, but there has never been a delusion sorrier and more contemptible than this.

Every age, too, has its own parasitic growth,

but our own, the hectic and trivial residue of society that flutters and intrigues in an atmosphere of heartless virtuosity, is of as little account in the general reckoning as that of any other. I am speaking, rather, of the great mass of mankind that does really work, and treats life, however unintelligently, seriously at least. This mass to-day has fallen into an evil mis-reckoning of the things that bring spiritual fullness and that ultimate justification of being when a man passes from one experience to another, knowing that each as it comes is completely significant, lived in simple association with the earth and his fellows. This particular corruption of a mechanical civilization is, it must be remembered, as much a vested interest as any other condition through which a society holds together, and it is as jealously and craftily guarded. The artists are too often accepted and patronized by this age at the price of idealizing the age's corruption under the disguise of a vast and imposing development of human activity, and too often they succumb before the temptation of reward and the threat of being reported as insensitive to the larger movement of the life of their own time. This tremendous and so general current of energy must, it is argued, proceed from justly purposed impulses in the spirit and body of man, and to fail in appreciation of this is to alienate oneself from the deeper purpose and temper of one's age. But it is a confusion of thought to

suppose that opposition to the ungenerous manifestations of an age, and refusal to ally oneself with them, no matter how powerful and prevalent they may be, is to retreat from a life that one has not the courage to face, and to evade one's obligations to society. To seclude oneself from this problem is cowardly enough, but we must remember that to compromise about the matter is spiritual treason. The state of art is a good criterion always of the state of its surrounding life, more probably by implication than by reflection. And nobility of art can proceed only from nobility of life.

Mr. Robert Bridges, in his address on "The Necessity of Poetry," informed throughout by a master's understanding, as was inevitable, has a passage bearing directly upon the question that we are considering, and, I venture with deep reverence to think, with some misunderstanding. He says:

> Morals can be excluded from Art only by the school which maintains that Art is nothing but competent *Expression,* and that, since what I call ugly can be as competently expressed as what I call beautiful, Art can make no distinction; . . . . the portrait of a man suffering from confluent smallpox might thus be a masterpiece; but if theorists assert that all these things are equally beautiful because equally capable of competent expression, and that such expression . . . makes all things equally beautiful . . . to this I reply that we live in a free country where every one may think and say what he pleases.

It is true that many of us hold this competent (using the word, as Mr. Bridges uses it, at its full value) expression to be the single and complete justification of art, the only possible witness by which we can judge it, and that it is from the quickening of our own perception by contact with such completeness of expression that all our delight in art comes. But this is very far from saying that it is possible for any artist to achieve this competent expression of anything that seems to him himself to be ugly. It is impossible, as Mr. Bridges allows, to distinguish by reference to any fixed standard between what is ugly and what is beautiful, but it seems to me certain that whatever the nature of the thing to be expressed may be, the artist, before he can express it with any real and profound competence, must perceive it through an emotion that is in itself noble and passionate. The spectacle of a man with confluent smallpox may, if we can conceive it in some absolute sense, be said to be ugly, but I believe that, by a fixed law of the creative mind, the artist could not give significant artistic expression to the absolute quality of ugliness in such a spectacle, and that any portrait of the man which could be said to have attained to competent expression would be found on examination to have been inspired by some deep emotion of pity, or perhaps even by splendid anger or hatred, with the implied love of humanity that underlies all irony.

An example comes to my mind at the moment bearing on the point. There was lately in London an exhibition of drawings of the French battle-fields by Mr. Paul Nash. I suppose nothing could more confidently be said to represent ugliness in itself than the blasted landscape and forlorn ruin in the midst of which these drawings were made. Here is a subject that violates everything that we have in our minds when we think of the idea of beauty, and as to this there is a general conformity of opinion. The result is that many people who do not consider very closely the problems and workings of the creative energy, finding that these drawings at once direct their thought to a reality which they know or believe to be ugly in itself, have exclaimed that the artist's work is an extraordinarily vivid present-ment of the horror of war, but that of course it cannot be called, that, indeed, it does not even claim to be, beautiful. Here is the fallacy so ripe that it must fall at a touch. Mr. Nash, it is true, has been deeply stirred by the savage cruelty of his subject; he has seen it with vehement indignation, and with a tremendous sense of the conflict of that cruelty with the teeming country-side of England that he has painted so well in more fortunate days. And out of this vehemence and poignancy have sprung passion, and that passion has liberated his artistic faculty before those desolate scenes no less than the passion of love has done at other times before his home

woodlands, and has created beauty as surely. It is important to notice that in Mr. Nash's case it is definitely what we may call the absolute ugliness of the battlefields that has been the original material upon which his impulse has worked.

Other artists, such as Mr. William Rothenstein, have seen rather a ruined and yet not altogether hopeless grandeur in the same scenes, and achieved truth in another way; while others yet again have seen in them but a certain decorative picturesqueness, and so, as it seems to me, have missed truth altogether. But while Mr. Nash's mind is directed definitely to the ugliness that is, perhaps, the most obvious and unquestionable aspect of his subject, his art has been inspired not by the bare emotion of hatred, of which art can never be born, but of a furious compassion and of a resentment which is essentially a devoted remembrance of the loveliness that has been destroyed. And that is as near as ugliness can ever come to service from the artist. When we speak of ugliness we must mean, I suppose, something that is a denial of life—just as confluent smallpox is a denial of life. But it is certain that no artist—one means, of course, no good artist: a bad artist being, as Swinburne said, a contradiction in terms—could be inspired to creation by confluent smallpox *qua* confluent smallpox, and I am clear that no work of art could be instanced as being the competent

expression of ugliness that would not yield precisely the same results to analysis as Mr. Nash's war drawings.

While, however, we may find in isolated cases works of art that, without being inspired by ugliness, do at least consider ugliness in some manner, we are not likely to find any widely prevalent state of life in which ugliness is a normal condition entering even so far as this into the deliberation of its artists as a body. And in this present age of mechanical civilization there is a plain refusal of the artists as a whole to celebrate a social condition against which their instinct for life is in revolt, a condition which they know, in fact, to be ugly. I am speaking of the mechanical achievement and prosperity, the nature and meaning of which I have already attempted to define. The tragedies of poverty and oppression that are a by-product of this prosperity do, indeed, compel many artists to compassion or irony, but that is another matter. These tragedies are terrible and common enough, but they are an accident and not a salient characteristic of the age. The mechanical civilization, which could not escape our attention at the outset, is overwhelmingly successful in its own aims. The skill of the engineer, the organization of the business man, the ingenuity of commercial science, have built up a fabric of immense power, and moulded, or at least deeply influenced, the lives of many millions of citizens in the

great modern states. Of the immediate disaster in which this ordering has involved us it is unnecessary to speak. This age's achievement, for good or ill, lies in the general exploitation of a condition that is radically opposed to the intimate realization of man's nature in the understanding of earth and of his fellows, and it is an achievement that the artists, with an almost invariable resolution, have ignored. Than that it could have no more fatal condemnation.

The art of this age—I mean art in general—has a vitality that cannot fail to make it memorable in the greatest of all records. It is modern in that it makes and solves its own problems of technique, and is in the van of contemporary thought about social relationships and the ways in which man may most hopefully adjust himself to the eternal processes of life. But it steadfastly turns, with many varieties of personal manner and many contrasting preferences, but with a single governing instinct, away from a mechanical force with which it knows reconciliation is impossible, and towards the reality of the life that we have seen selected by Shakespeare and Thomas Hardy. However much we may have betrayed it, we all have in us the desire for daily contact, at once deliberate and impassioned, with the elementary processes of being, for the state when we are continually environed by the common things of earth and fellowship. It is the realization of this desire in their creations that gives its secure

appeal to the work of such artists as those of whom we have spoken, and it is the same realization in ourselves that means the only true fullness of life.

Before proceeding to consider in detail what should be the function of poetry in relation to the conditions of life that we have discussed, there are one or two subsidiary points arising from our general argument upon which it may be well to touch. I can hear some prophets of that mechanical achievement which I have condemned asking, with a show of confuting me in my own parish, whether I cannot see the beauty of many of the masterpieces of engineering science, of the perfectly balanced and efficient dynamo, of the vast lines of an iron suspension bridge, of the sensitive movement of a great crane, of the arrowy grace of an express locomotive. Let me say at once that I find nothing inherently abhorrent in the idea of a machine, and that I believe that the wholesome state of society for which we are looking would find a proper use for mechanical invention, and that the life of men would be the happier for it. But having allowed this, I should then answer my interrogators by saying that while I perceived fully the beauty of which they spoke, it was no defence of a disastrously bad application of human energy to protest that this energy nevertheless retained something of its native decency of instinct. Society at a given time may turn with common consent to lamentable and

degrading pursuits, but it does not follow that the spirit of man thereby wholly loses its proper grandeur and finer instincts. My charge is against the things that man has done, not against the being of man. If it were otherwise, there would be nothing for the artist in these days but withdrawal to his own contemplations and the fellowship of a few exiles like himself, from a world in which he has no part.

The deflection of human energy to the service of mere mechanical excitement comes from a complex cause. The discovery and general application of steam and electrical power, had it been properly directed, might have eased our daily life in a hundred desirable ways, by solving, in a word, the problem of the necessary dirty work of the world. But one of the subtlest operations of character lies in the individual's decision as to how he shall employ his natural talents. It is idle to suppose, as is sometimes done by people who would pass as superior to all moral considerations, that the mere possession and indiscriminate exercise of talents is in itself an end of responsibility, as though an expert chemist might as fitly poison as purify the water supply. But while it is part of the human contract, so to speak, an essential of fine character, that great talents shall be greatly applied, it unfortunately does often happen that the possession of such talent coincides with a weak sense of responsi-

bility in its use. And the mind is particularly prone to this abuse when the talent happens to be at once easy of acquisition and productive of that consciousness of mastery which mankind has always found so delightful. Let a man discover that he can come to notable mastery of the most trivial accomplishment, and he is in danger of exercising it without any sense of its proportion or significance, and we are only too apt to applaud his indiscretion. Juggling and tight-rope-walking, for example, may be amusing diversions, but they are poor professions to claim a life's devotion as we see them doing. And in no way in the history of human effort has this powerful sense of mastery been so easily attainable as in the region of mechanical invention and application. The mere direction of a machine that makes something with absolute precision has been found by men to be a seductive thing without any reference to the purpose or fundamental use of the machine's product. From this delight has resulted a vast excess of mechanical output beyond any possible natural demand, and the distribution, arrangement and disposal of this excess has become an almost primary concern to vast numbers of people who have no direct contact with machinery at all, while vast numbers again, who do live in that direct contact, are corrupted by the continual exercise of an intoxicating power without any interest in the

ends to which that power is working.* If in the process and in spite of this absence of talent man's radical sense of beauty sometimes asserts itself, and the monsters of misapplied inventions

* This is a question of which the ramifications are, of course, endless. I see the chief cause of mechanical ascendancy in the sense of mastery that the machine imparts to its users rather than in the profit that its exploitation brings to the capitalist, because I believe that, while it is possible for so tremendous a volume of human energy as is represented by this phenomenon to be directed by authority against its own ultimate good, I do not believe it is possible for it to be so directed wholly against its will. The people using this power have been shamefully exploited, it is true, but this could not have happened unless some influential body of them had derived a subtle kind of satisfaction in the process. The industrial revolution that threatened and, perhaps, still threatens Europe, is conceived, it may be noted, rather against the conditions than against the nature of mechanical labour. The whole influence of mechanical ascendency is, as I have tried to show, evil, but at present we are forced to admit that if the conditions under which it is conducted were reformed, its nature would be accepted, and this because of the satisfaction of which I have spoken. It will be my purpose to show how such a thing as poetry may help to effect a far deeper reformation of human feeling, but in the meantime I would say that it does not follow from my argument that I think the unskilled operative at an automatic machine derives any satisfaction, subtle or otherwise, from his work. He is the victim of a controlling force, which is, nevertheless, not primarily that of the capitalist's greed but that of the mechanical mind's gratification in its activity.

assume comely or impressive shapes, the abuse is not therefore the less but rather the more lamentable. There remains the unescapable fact that this almost unprecedented conspiring of human enterprise and energy does nothing to satisfy man's fundamental need for realizing himself and the earth upon which he lives.

Another sophistry that may be mentioned here is that which complains that the ideal of life which has been suggested in my preceding remarks has immemorially been achieved by a great part of mankind, and that the result has been lethargy of mind and spirit. The tedium of village life is notorious, and from this it is argued that the basic conditions of that life in themselves make for dull hearts. In the first place, I believe the tedium itself to be largely the invention of glib townsmen with a superficial power of observation quite unfitted to give any but a false report of their silent and more humorous country fellows. There is a story of a journalist who, after spending a week in a Gloucestershire village, concluded his report upon the character of its inhabitants by saying, " the people of those parts are kindly, but have slow wits bred of generations of monotony on their land." This came to the notice of one of these witless folk, and his comment was, " I see'd that gaffer; he put a reg'lar flock of questions but he were the best I ever for answering his-self."

The problems of village communities are,

nevertheless, real, but they are lightened and not intensified by the circumstance that they arise in a condition of life that is essentially wholesome. In any case, the lack of momentum that you may find in the agricultural labourer is far less desolating and far more easily corrected than the deadly oscillation between sullenness and hysteria of the great mechanic and artizan class in our towns. Nor, it should be unnecessary to add, do I sympathise with any merely unconsidered cry of " back to the land," raised by dilettantes who suppose the country to be the most suitable environment for their natural idleness.

We now turn to our main consideration. How can poetry help to cure this malady into which the spirit of man has fallen? I do not think I can do better than by taking a single poem, one of no great length, and examining as closely as may be its operation upon our minds, assuming it to come to life in our minds at all. It shall be a very simple and famous one, involving no difficult problem of psychology or technical structure, Wordsworth's " Daffodils."

I wandered lonely as a cloud
  That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
  A host of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
  And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
  Along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
  Outdid the sparkling waves in glee;
A poet could not but be gay
  In such a jocund company;
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
  In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
  Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

The more we consider the nature of poetry, the more adequate and precise does Milton's stipulation appear. It must, we remember, be simple, sensuous, and passionate, conditions which Coleridge elaborates, not unhelpfully, thus—single in conception, abounding in sensible images, and informing them all with the spirit of the mind. To take these essential qualities and refer them to the poem that we are considering: "simple," it seems to me, implies not only singleness of conception, but also a corresponding singleness of expression; it denotes, in fact, the achievement of the artistic form that conveys

complete perception from one mind to another, and, as it is a condition that relates to the finished poem with all its contributory parts, it may best, I think, be considered last instead of first, as Milton puts it. First, then, we are told that it must be sensuous, or abounding in sensible images. The virtue of an image to the poet's reader is that it forces his mind in the most direct manner to an unembarrassed act of creation, to a motion having something of the lucid vitality that is the poet's own. It is always possible for us to see a thing with the physical eye dully, without any consequent act of sharp mental realization. But when a poet sees a thing with sufficient intensity to translate it from its own natural expression to a mental image recorded in words, he not only proves his own realization of the object, but makes it imperative that we, in reading his words, shall perform an act of realization ourselves or get from him nothing but empty sound. So communicative of life is the poet's created image of a natural object, that many minds, while they are still relatively insensitive to the natural object in itself, respond to the poet's realization of it with a realization of their own. This mental state of realization, it must be noted in passing, is altogether more vivid than that of mere appreciation. Few people would be likely to see a blowing bed of daffodils at a lakeside without some heightening of emotion; but even fewer, perhaps, would see

it with that quickening of formal vision which it is the highest of our hopes to foster, since it is the condition of understanding, of justice. When, however, we see nothing with the physical eye, but read of

> A host of golden daffodils;
> Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
> Fluttering and dancing in the breeze,

we either perform a complete act of mental realization or we experience nothing at all. The image that is before us cannot be perceived with the blurred appreciation through which we may so easily see the natural object; if it exists for us at all it exists lucidly, completely. Although the philosophers may tell us that the natural object cannot exist apart from the beholding mind, it is clear that it may be beholden by a succession of minds without inducing any vivid realizing movement in one of them; but those lines of the poet cannot operate in this way, since either they convey nothing, or the mind in perceiving the image that is created in them is really perceiving an image that it has itself created. There is another example of this direct imaging in Wordsworth's poem:

> Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
> Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

But the image in poetry sometimes fulfils a more complex function than this. The stimulus of mind such as is received from the creation of a

simple image, as those just mentioned, becomes yet greater and subtler when the process is the dual one of perceiving the image of one natural object through the creation of that of another. When the mind performs this act of co-relating the unrelated* it is being educated for its most fruitful activity, and it is the poet who most habitually helps us towards this liberation. The poet presents to us two separate simple images, "I wandered lonely," and "a cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills." Each has an independent being, and before we can proceed to understanding of his thought, we have to recreate each of them separately in our own mind. But his concern at the moment is with the fact of his loneliness; and to express this with the greatest possible force, he states it first in one simple image, then creates another and wholly unrelated image, carries over our attention from the governing idea of loneliness in the first image to this particular characteristic of the second, and applies it back again to the original conception upon which it operates with enormously increased intensity. Thus, again, in

> The waves beside them danced; but they
> Outdid the sparkling waves in glee. . . .

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* I owe this admirable phrase to my friend, Mr. H. P. Morrison. Whether he invented it or discovered it in the depths of his French learning, I do not know, but it is too good not to steal as readily as if it were the commonplace of criticism that it deserves to be.

and, very splendidly, in—

> Continuous as the stars that shine
> And twinkle on the milky way,
> They stretched in never-ending line
> Along the margin of a bay.

This, then, is what we mean when we say that a poem should be sensuous or abounding with sensible images, and we see the value that this quality has in bracing our minds. We may now examine what is meant by the claim that a poem should, further, be passionate, or, as Coleridge says, informed throughout with the spirit of the mind.*

By passionate, it must be remembered, we mean something more than emotional intensity. Coleridge reminds us that the word, as Milton uses it, implies an intellectual quality, a power, beyond the translation of the vivid perception into an image, of giving a whole poetic conception intellectual stability, of informing it, as it were, not only with sensitiveness but also with the proportions of lucid thought. It is a common error to think of the intellect as being cold and dry, an energy with which poetry should have as little to do as possible. The fact is, however, that

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* I do not think that it quite necessarily follows that because these demands that Milton makes must be met before a poem can be acclaimed as satisfying us in all respects, a poem that disregards one or another of them must be wholly a failure.

while poetry may achieve durable charm without this quality, which is in effect what Rossetti called fundamental brain work, no poetry of the highest order does exist without it.

It often happens that a young poet, in the first flush of his poetic sensibility, enchants us by the very rapture of imaginative experience through which he is passing, but it is not until he has been working for some years that we are able to tell whether he has the profounder gift of transforming intellectual power into passion. If he does not develop this faculty the result is inevitably a barren maturity following upon a rapidly exhausted flight of early song. Wagner spoke wisely when he said that before he could tell whether a man was truly a poet he must know whether he could sing when he was forty. We have known instances in our own time of poets who have thus disappointed enthusiastic and reasonable hope. The reaction that has followed upon the excited applause that greeted the work of such a poet as Stephen Phillips has been bitter in proportion to the exaggeration of the welcome. But the one is unjustified and cruel as the other was unjustified and hysterical. Phillips' early work had, and will always retain, an undeniable charm. That it clearly echoed the work of other poets is no condemnation, since as much may be said of the early work of any of the masters. Here was a poetic sensitiveness, ardent, sufficiently personal to make its own ventures,

provoking in the poet an acute sense of a certain stiff verbal beauty, and communicating delight to any ungrudging reader. But there was behind its sensitiveness no intellectual staying power, and once the charming energy of youth had spent itself, there was no more durable faculty waiting to exercise the poet's gift.

Perhaps the most notable instance in our own time of a poet who has, on the other hand, shown this development from the poetry of enchanting sensibility to that of intellectual passion is to be found in Mr. W. B. Yeats. It is instructive, as showing the relative inability of readers who respond readily enough to the slighter graces of poetry to appreciate the profounder beauty of this passion, to hear it said, as it often is, that this poet's later work lacks the enchantment of his earlier. To a right understanding, Mr. Yeats' work has grown steadily in significance from the first, and this because of its surely maturing brain work. In Wordsworth's poem, simple in occasion as it is, we have this quality working with steady incandescence. Down to the second line of the third stanza we have a perfectly shaped statement and elaboration of the image, growing in intensity to the marvellous figure of the flowers outdoing the sparkling waves in glee. So far we have, created by a consummate master, that essential part of poetry which is so championed by certain writers in these later days who, while they do well enough to remind us of an

eternal necessity, seem, by their assumption of the title *imagiste*, to forget that their aim has been part of the aim of every poet of consequence since the beginning. But it is at this point that Wordsworth shows us that the poet's business does not end with the creation of an image, but that he must go beyond this to the application of his image to requirements of profound and governing thought. It is here that perhaps the poet's greatest danger lies, and his greatest glories for the winning. Merely to make his creation the occasion for some trite moral reflection is to debase his art and waste our time. What he has to do is so to focus his intellect upon the image that he has created as to be able not only to make us realize the image itself, but also to perceive with passionate understanding the significance of that image in the whole texture of our lives. We may observe then with what exquisite precision Wordsworth achieves this end. First he tells us that he could not but be gay in such a jocund company, then that he was receiving some virtue without knowing what it was:

> I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
> What wealth the show to me had brought.

Then in the last stanza, with that lucidity to which the whole difficult world of the brain is touched at rare moments at the great artist's bidding, we have the philosophical application of

the poetic conception made, and made, in Milton's full use of the word, passionately:

> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude;
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
> And dances with the daffodils.

This is a perfect example of Coleridge's " informing all with the spirit of the mind." Its value to us as readers cannot be set too highly. Poetry which freely complies with this demand rescues the artist's office finely from the last possible designs of the dilettante mind which, at the risk of falling away altogether from life, supposes that the creation of an image is a sufficient end in itself. To be dilettante in the arts is indeed more admirable than to be pedestrian, but the artist who has any understanding of his responsibility refuses one course no less than the other.

We have finally to consider the quality of simplicity which Milton places first among his conditions of poetry. The fundamental obligation of the poet to translate the formlessness of life into intelligible form for our understanding must not be confused, as it often is, with the banal statement in lifeless terms of generalizations with which we are already familiar. For example, we all know as a matter of workaday experience that a charge to goodness, at the expense if need be of

cleverness, is sound enough in itself. But when Kingsley* says

> Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,

he is not being simple in any real poetic sense, but merely playing up to the platitude that is already established in our minds, and relying upon that for his effect and not upon any creative perception of his own.

He is, profoundly, not being simple at all in the way that Milton means. He is, rather, setting down an obvious and widely current conclusion of an extremely complex and difficult psychological question, the obscure nature of which he leaves untouched. The simplicity by which the poet gains distinction is that which seizes some illusive operation of the mind upon natural objects and so expresses it that what was incomprehensible to us before becomes suddenly defined. In other words, the poet must make a simple statement, but it must be a statement of something that without his vision must have remained dark and formless. Nothing could be more superbly simple, for example, than

> Nothing extenuate
> Nor set down aught in malice; then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely but too well.

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* My use of Kingsley as an example in this connection does not lessen my admiration for the poet of "The Sands of Dee."

But in two lines here is recorded a whole voyage of psychological insight. It may be added that since no experience is ever final, an endless succession of poets may bring simplicity to the same pre-occupation, and each give us delight and satisfaction in turn. Even the same poet may do this himself on many occasions:

> This life is but a shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more.

And again:

> We are such stuff
> As dreams are made of and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

And again:

> Golden lads and girls all must
> As chimney sweepers come to dust.

And yet again:

> Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
> But sad mortality o'ersways their power.

And lastly, to give but one more of the numerous examples which Shakespeare alone might supply:

> Of all the wonders that I have yet heard,
> It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
> Seeing that death, a necessary end,
> Will come when it will come.

In Wordsworth's "Daffodils" we have a remarkable instance of this first necessity in

poetry. The poem in its meaning is clear for any reader. We leave it with a perfectly formed realization, reached through a sharply defined and particular instance, of the pleasure that may come to us from remembered moments of ecstatic experiences. But we are made free of this simplicity of perception only through this subtle psychological analysis on the part of the poet. The phrase,

> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude,

is magnificent in its simplicity, because the phenomenon which is here reduced to plain terms is not one of simple appearance in itself, but so intricate that for all the tens of millions of people who had experienced it not one before Wordsworth had been able to arrest it with the perfect touch of definition. Of the value for us which this quality gives to poetry it need only be said that without it we can understand nothing, or at most something which is not worth our understanding; with it every true poem is treasure trove for us, giving us that rarest spiritual satisfaction which we experience when we can suddenly resolve obscurity, and know our minds liberated from confusion. We may now summarize the impression that Wordsworth's poem yields to alert reading, thus: our perceptions are quickened by having to create images to correspond to those created by the poet. These

quickened senses are then directed by the poet's intellectual passion to a relation of these particular images to a presiding vision of life and experience. Then, by the primary creative act of the poet, the bringing of material into shape, these processes of our mind become definable in our own consciousness: are complete.*

Having now examined the ideal of life to which the spirit of man may most worthily move, and the way in which these generations seem to have departed from that ideal, we may ask ourselves by what means an understanding of this art of poetry may help us towards the recovery of what has become to the world in part a lost estate. When the human mind gives itself over to false pursuits, it is seldom of any use to denounce its error without seeking to repair the state of mind itself. You may withdraw man from his pre-occupation with the unworthy only by giving him the worthy to contemplate in its stead. The process of such contemplation is one of subtle action and reaction. By a happy providence, the appeal of poetry, if it is presented wisely, is one which is irresistible to every mind that is not wholly atrophied by mean concerns. And the very act of appreciation of the poet's

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* I have said nothing about the rhythm of poetry here since it does not affect my immediate purpose. It is a sufficient remark that it is an inevitable property of the creative act which we have been considering.

expression involves a spiritual quickening, in which everything that is trivial and ignoble is rejected. It will tell us nothing of the poverty-stricken life which is so prevalent with us, since with this it has nothing directly to do. But it could so regenerate the mind of man that he could no longer consent to a condition of society that robs him of his richest birthright.

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